

DANIEL

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PBC DANIEL: INTRODUCTION

Daniel is a fascinating and enigmatic book. Some of the stories in the first half of the book are very well known, both by people who use the Bible regularly and by others who have little to do with church—especially the story of Daniel in the lions’ den, and to a lesser extent the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. In terms of the history of interpretation of the book of Daniel, the images from the ‘apocalyptic’ visions in the second half of the book have attracted most attention, especially the ‘one like a son of man’ (NIV) in chapter 7, and to a lesser extent the ‘abomination that desolates’, which appears a number of times. The ‘abomination that desolates’ is picked up explicitly in the Gospels, and it seems very likely that Jesus draws on the ‘one like a son of man’ as part of the background to his self-designation as ‘the Son of Man’. Moreover, the book of Daniel is a very important element in the key aspect of Jesus’ teaching, the kingdom of God. Kingdom language (words like ‘king’, ‘kingdom’ or ‘kingship’, ‘rule’, sovereignty’ and so on) appears more in Daniel than anywhere else in the Old Testament, and here, as in the Gospels, God’s kingdom has a dual aspect: it is already established but will only be fully realized at some point in the future. The imagery from Daniel is also extensively drawn upon in the book of Revelation in the New Testament.

One scholar writes, ‘Daniel is a very curious book in many respects. From almost every standpoint it presents a dual character: it contains two kinds of material, apparently intended originally for two different audiences; its contents relate to two different times and places; it has two canonical forms; and it is written in two languages’ (Davies, p. 11). Most of the rest of this introduction will explore this ‘dual character’.

Two kinds of material

The book of Daniel readily falls into two halves. The first six chapters consist of six stories relating events in Daniel’s life (and in the lives of his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego), while the final six chapters describe four very strange visions that Daniel had. The stories are delightful (although they include some darker elements), and, at least superficially, are easy to follow and understand. The visions are odd, contain some rather gruesome imagery and are

decidedly allusive and difficult to pin down. The stories appear straightforward (and actually their main themes are obvious); the visions are anything but straightforward. The stories and visions may be outlined as follows.

Story 1:

Daniel and friends in the Babylonian court

In chapter 1, we learn that Daniel and three other Jewish young men (Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, renamed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; Daniel was renamed Belteshazzar) were among the exiles taken by King Nebuchadnezzar from Judah to Babylon. In Babylon they were trained in Babylonian ways to serve in the king's palace, but they refused to eat the rich food and to drink the wine they were given, insisting instead that they eat only vegetables and drink only water. At the end of a trial period, they not only proved much healthier than those who had accepted the rich food and wine, but they also had greater understanding and wisdom than the Babylonian wise men. Such wisdom and understanding were, of course, given to them by God.

Story 2:

Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's first dream

Chapter 2 describes how the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had a strange dream of a great statue made of various materials, which was destroyed by a stone. Unable to interpret the vision, he called on all his wise men not only to interpret the dream, but even to tell him what the dream was. While they could not, Daniel both related the dream and told Nebuchadnezzar what it meant: the various materials from which the statue was constructed represented successive kingdoms of which Nebuchadnezzar's was the first; the stone represented the kingdom that God would set up, which would destroy all the other kingdoms but would never be destroyed itself. As a result of relating the dream and interpreting it for Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel was promoted to high office. Upon his request, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were also promoted.

Story 3:

The fiery furnace

Chapter 3 relates that Nebuchadnezzar had a huge golden statue built and insisted that everyone bow down to the statue when a selection of musical instruments sounded. Punishment for disobeying this command was to be thrown into a furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down and were therefore thrown into the furnace. Not only did they survive unharmed, but while they were there Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth figure with them whom he understood to be an angel from God. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were released and promoted to even higher positions.

Story 4:

Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's second dream

Again Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, described in chapter 4, which he couldn't understand. Again the Babylonian wise men couldn't interpret it for him, and again Daniel could. The dream this time was of a great tree which was chopped down, and it related to Nebuchadnezzar himself: he had become too proud and as a result God would take his kingdom away from him for seven years. The kingdom would be restored to him only when he humbled himself before God. The dream came true and Nebuchadnezzar praised Daniel's God because of it.

Story 5:

Daniel is used by God to humble Belshazzar

In chapter 5, we encounter a different king, Belshazzar, who is described as Nebuchadnezzar's son. He is pictured as an arrogant man who threw a huge party, using silver and gold vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem for the food and drink. In the middle of his great party, a mysterious hand appeared and wrote something on the wall that neither Belshazzar nor any of his wise men could understand. Daniel was summoned. He explained that the words related God's judgment on Belshazzar and predicted his death that very night. Indeed, Belshazzar did die that night as the Babylonian kingdom fell to the Persians, but before he died he promoted Daniel to 'third in the kingdom'.

Story 6:

Daniel in the lion's den

The king in chapter 6 is the Persian king, Darius. At the suggestion of his leading officials, he issued a decree that no one must pray to anyone but him for 30 days, upon penalty of death. Daniel continued to pray to God three times a day, in front of a window open towards Jerusalem, and Darius' officials pointed this out to the king. Darius had no option but to have Daniel cast into a den of lions (the stipulated punishment), although he didn't want to do it. The following morning, Darius returned to the lions' den to discover that Daniel had survived. Darius had him taken out and the officials and their families thrown in instead. Darius then decreed that everyone should 'tremble and fear before the God of Daniel'.

Vision 1:

Daniel's alternating vision

Chapter 7 consists of a vision that Daniel saw, which alternates between two scenes. In one scene, four grotesque beasts arise from the sea one by one; the other seems to be set in heaven, where an 'ancient one' sits on his throne and 'one like a human being' appears before him. The explanation of this vision given to Daniel indicates that the four beasts represent successive human kingdoms, which are judged by the 'ancient one' for the way they act. Dominion is taken away from them and given instead to the 'one like a human being' and to 'the holy ones of the Most High'.

Vision 2:

Daniel's vision of a ram and a goat

Unlike the previous vision, the one of a ram and a goat in chapter 8 is explained in relation to specific human empires. The ram is the Medo-Persian empire that followed the Babylonian empire (of which Nebuchadnezzar was a king), and it is followed by the Greek empire, represented by a goat. The ram had two horns, representing the kings of Media and Persia. The goat had a great horn, which was broken, to be replaced by four horns. Out of one of these horns a little horn sprouted, which grew exceedingly great. It is this little horn that is the

climax of the vision. Although the text doesn't identify the horn, it is generally agreed that it represents the second-century BC ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who instigated terrible oppression of the Jews.

Vision 3:

Daniel's prayer and the vision of 70 weeks

Most of chapter 9 consists of a prayer that Daniel prays to God, in which he confesses the sins of his people and asks for God to act on their behalf and for God's own reputation. The chapter concludes with a further vision in which Daniel is told about 70 weeks that are decreed for his people. The 70 weeks are broken down into seven weeks, 62 weeks and one final week, which has two halves. The climax of these weeks is 'an abomination that desolates' in the first half of the last week, followed by the decreed end of the desolator.

Vision 4:

Daniel's vision of kings of the south and north

The final vision has an introduction in chapter 10 and a conclusion at the end of chapter 12. In between lies the vision proper, which tells of various kings of the north and kings of the south. It builds up to the final king of the north, who wreaks havoc upon Jerusalem and the temple and sets up 'the abomination that makes desolate'. The death of this king is related at the end of chapter 11, before chapter 12 describes what will happen to 'the holy ones' following this king's death (or at 'the time of the end'), including the resurrection of those who have died. It is generally agreed that this vision portrays events during the Persian and Greek empires, particularly as they affected the Jews.

Two different perspectives

The stories and the visions are told from different perspectives. The stories are in the third person—they are told *about* Daniel; the visions are in the first person—Daniel himself relates what he has seen. Hence, in the earlier chapters the reader is given an overview of what takes place by a seemingly omniscient narrator and has access to information that no individual in the story could know; in the later chapters the

reader shares Daniel's limited perspective and his limited understanding, which is emphasized several times. Indeed, in the stories Daniel is the one who is able to interpret dreams and visions, but when it comes to his own visions in the later chapters, he is unable to interpret them and needs help from a divine messenger. Perhaps, by implication, the reader also needs divine help to understand what is going on.

Two eras referred to

The setting of the stories is quite explicit: they are dated by the years of various exilic kings and are set during Israel's captivity in Babylon or Persia. Chapters 1—4 all take place within the reign of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned when Judah fell to Babylon (in 587BC). Chapter 5 is also set during the Babylonian exile, this time under King Belshazzar. However, the events of this chapter take place just before the Babylonian empire falls to the Persians (in 539BC). The king in chapter 6 is the Persian King Darius. Precise dating of this chapter is more difficult, as we will see later.

The visions are also *set* during this period (in other words, Daniel sees the visions during the reigns of the Babylonian King Belshazzar and the Persian King Cyrus), but they relate to events occurring right up to the second century BC (and, some would argue, much beyond that time). Indeed, the primary focus of these visions seems to be events that took place in the 160s BC, especially the abolition by King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in 167BC, of a twice-daily offering performed in the temple in the morning and at dusk, and his desecration of the altar, which effectively brought to an end the Jewish temple cult. Events are described as they relate to Jerusalem, suggesting that the physical setting is back in Judah rather than in exile. Thus, while the stories clearly describe events in exile under Babylonian and Persian rule in the sixth century BC, the background to the visions seems to be Jerusalem under the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century. This may indicate that the visions were written at this time, but commentators disagree over this dating.

Two different languages

One of the strangest features of the book of Daniel is that it uses two different (although related) languages. The first chapter is in Hebrew (like most of the rest of the Old Testament). But in 2:4 we read the words, 'The Chaldeans said to the king (in Aramaic)...' and what

follows is in Aramaic. When the Chaldeans finish speaking, however, the Aramaic continues, right up to the end of chapter 7. Chapters 8—12 are then in Hebrew again. Thus, chapters 1 and 8—12 are in Hebrew, while chapters 2—7 are in Aramaic, and this division cuts across the division between the stories in chapters 1—6 and the visions in chapters 7—12. But there is another feature that indicates the unity of chapters 2—7: these chapters are carefully structured in a pattern commonly used in the Old Testament, known as a chiasmus (from the Greek letter *chi*, shaped like an X):

- A Dream about four earthly kingdoms and God’s kingdom (ch. 2)
- B Story about Jews being faithful in the face of death (ch. 3)
- C Story about royal hubris that is humbled (ch. 4)
- C Story about royal hubris that is humbled (ch. 5)
- B Story about Jews being faithful in the face of death (ch. 6)
- A Vision about four earthly kingdoms and God’s kingdom (ch. 7)

This may indicate that chapters 2—7 circulated independently before chapters 1 and 8—12 were added. Chapter 1 does have the feel of an introduction, setting the scene and introducing the main characters. Chapters 8—12 then have a very different feel from the earlier chapters. They seem to have events of the second century BC as their background, rather than the sixth century as is the case with chapters 1—6. In some ways, chapter 7 is different from both but has clear links with both. It may be that it functions as a pivot between the earlier and the later chapters: as Lederach suggests, it has a ‘dual purpose’ (p. 19), concluding the Aramaic section of the book and also introducing the visions written in Hebrew.

Two canonical forms

Like the rest of the Old Testament, Daniel exists in a Hebrew form and in a Greek form (in fact, there are a number of Hebrew and Greek manuscripts). The Hebrew version lies behind the book that appears in Protestant editions of the Bible, while the Greek is used as the basis of Catholic editions. The Greek version has three additions that do not appear in the Hebrew. ‘The Prayer of Azariah and the Hymn of the Three Young Men’ is inserted after 3:23 and relates a prayer and hymn offered while Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (= Azariah) were in the furnace. ‘Susanna’ is often found as chapter 13 of Daniel (or appears in the Apocrypha), although in some Greek manuscripts

it appears before chapter 1. This is because we encounter here a very young Daniel. The story tells of a woman called Susanna who is raped by two elders of her village. It is Susanna, however, who is put on trial for adultery and would have been found guilty and executed but for the intervention of Daniel. ‘Bel and the Dragon’ usually occurs as the final chapter in Daniel (or in the Apocrypha). It consists of two stories in which Daniel shows the superiority of his God (and actually of himself) over the gods of King Cyrus of Persia. In the second story, Daniel is again thrown to the lions, this time for six days. While in the lions’ den, he is fed by the prophet Habakkuk. In this commentary we will follow the Hebrew text and will not deal with the additions found in the Greek text.

Two places in the canon

In the Christian Old Testament, Daniel appears as the fourth of the major prophets, following Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and just before the twelve minor prophets. In the Hebrew Bible, the book is to be found among the Writings, following Esther and just before Ezra-Nehemiah. This may be largely because of when it was written, but there is also an impact upon its interpretation if we don’t presume that it is one of the ‘prophets’ and instead read it as one of the ‘exilic’ or ‘post-exilic’ books. Indeed, although Daniel clearly draws extensively on Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it is quite different literature from these other books.

Apocalyptic literature

One of the ways in which Daniel is different from other Old Testament literature is that it contains more ‘apocalyptic’ material than other books. Indeed, it is regarded by many as the only Old Testament ‘apocalypse’, just as Revelation is the only New Testament apocalypse. The term ‘apocalypse’ is a somewhat slippery one, however, and there has been much debate about just how it should be defined and what should be described in this way. The term derives from the opening words of the book of Revelation: ‘The *revelation* [*apocalypse*] of Jesus Christ, which God gave to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.’ It is clear that Revelation draws heavily on Daniel. There are a number of non-biblical books which are categorized as ‘apocalyptic literature’ (1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 2 Apocalypse of

Baruch, 3 Apocalypse of Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham, Apocalypse of Peter) but Daniel is also quite different from these in some ways. Therefore, Daniel is often taken as an early example of an ‘apocalypse’ upon which later writers drew in different ways. Nonetheless, there are earlier parts of the Old Testament which also contain material that might be described as ‘apocalyptic’, particularly Isaiah 24—27, Joel, the early chapters of Ezekiel and parts of Zechariah. Daniel probably drew on such works as these. Full-blown apocalyptic literature is typically characterized by:

- The expectation of an impending cosmic catastrophe
- The use of fantastic imagery to portray this end-time
- Parallels between earthly and heavenly events
- The intervention of heavenly beings: angels and demons
- Salvation beyond the catastrophe for the faithful
- A division of human history into clearly defined segments
- Pseudonymy, where the work is ascribed to an ancient biblical worthy
- Reuse of biblical imagery

Relationship to other biblical books

As we work through Daniel, it will be obvious that it draws extensively on other biblical literature. This is an important key to understanding the book: it is largely an interpretation of events in Israel’s history in light of other biblical material. The most obvious parallel to the first six chapters is the story of Joseph in Genesis: there are very clear links between the two which rather suggest that the author of Daniel at least knew the Joseph stories and drew upon them as he wrote about Daniel. There are also parallels with the book of Esther, but not such as would suggest that it influenced the writing of Daniel. The final six chapters draw particularly on the major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), although they make use also of the minor prophets and some other parts of the Old Testament.

The message of the book

There is no doubt about the overriding message of the book of Daniel, whether in the stories or the visions, in the Hebrew chapters or in the Aramaic section: regardless of the actions of the powerful rulers of human empires, ultimate sovereignty resides with the God

of the Jews and with that God alone. The implications of this message are different in different contexts. Thus, in the first six chapters, the faithful Jews cooperate as much as possible with the foreign kings and are able to function effectively within the political structures of those regimes. They do practise a degree of non-violent resistance, but they earn the respect of the kings and hold high office in the kings' court. Indeed, for the most part the kings are rather well-disposed to the faithful Jews in their court. Things are very different in the second half of the book, where foreign rulers are seen as oppressors who try to subdue the Jews and prohibit the practice of their religion. There is no hint here that it might be possible to cooperate with these regimes and certainly not to hold high office while remaining a faithful Jew. At the same time, there is no suggestion that violent resistance should be contemplated, and there may even be condemnation of those who take this route. Instead, faithful Jews are to remain true to their God and trust that God will work things out aright in the end. Indeed, they are to remain faithful even if it costs them their lives—as it will for many, it seems. At 'the time of the end' they will rise to receive their reward.

Other commentaries

Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1978)

An accessible commentary, although her conclusions are more conservative than mine. Good on application.

John J. Collins, *Daniel*, Hermeneia (Fortress Press, 1993)

Probably *the* recent academic commentary on Daniel. Very thorough, although a complex read at times.

P.R. Davies, *Daniel*, Old Testament Guides (JSOT Press, 1985)

An introductory book which provides an overview of the contents of the book of Daniel and outlines the main issues that engage the scholars.

John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary (Word Books, 1989)

A thorough and reasonably conservative commentary which relates scholarly study of Daniel to issues of life and faith today. More accessible for those with some theological training, and some knowledge of Hebrew helps.

Paul Lederach, *Daniel*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Herald Press, 1994)

This is one of my favourites! It tackles the scholarly issues in an accessible fashion and comes to what I consider to be reasonable conclusions on important issues, like dating of the different parts of Daniel. Each section concludes with some application for today.

Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Apollos, 2002)

For an up-to-date commentary that takes the scholarly questions seriously and also seeks to make some application to life and faith today, this is my first choice.

Paul L. Redditt, *Daniel*, New Century Bible Commentary (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999)

This is an accessible academic commentary which, while it does not give space to application, concludes each chapter with a section on 'theology'.

C.L. Seow, *Daniel*, Westminster Bible Companion (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003)

A fairly academic but nonetheless accessible commentary, with some application to life and faith today.

Ronald S. Wallace, *The Message of Daniel*, The Bible Speaks Today (IVP, 1979)

A conservative approach to the book of Daniel which seeks to tease out its message for Christian life today.

SETTING *the* SCENE

Chapter 1 of Daniel sets the scene for the whole book. The first two verses introduce the reader to the overall setting in three different ways. Verse 1, along with verse 21, establishes the time frame within which the events recorded in the book are set. Verse 2, along with verse 3, indicates the place in which they are set. Verse 2 also gives us our first taste of the overriding theme of the book, a theme that is reiterated many times in various different ways. Verses 1–2 also function as the introduction to a chiasmus, which characterizes chapter 1. Lucas outlines the pattern thus:

- A Historical introduction (1:1–2)
 - B The young men taken for training (1:3–7)
 - C The story of the test (1:8–16)
 - B The young men excel in their training (1:17–20)
- A Historical conclusion (1:21)

The time frame

It must be acknowledged that the date indicated in verse 1 (probably 605^{BC}) raises some difficulties. Jeremiah 25:1 clearly states that the first year of Nebuchadrezzar (an alternative spelling of Nebuchadnezzar) was the *fourth* year of Jehoiakim's reign, not the third as asserted here. It is possible that the discrepancy results from the different ways of calculating the years of a king's reign: sometimes the king's first year was counted as year 1, at other times as year 0. Be that as it may, the key point about the time frame is that the whole of Daniel is set in the period when a significant proportion of Israel's population was in exile.

Daniel 1:21 refers to the first year of King Cyrus. This is 539^{BC}, the year when Cyrus issued an edict permitting the Israelites to return to their homeland. A central question in Daniel is how Israelites, or Jews as they later became known, were to remain faithful to their God in a land where their faith was a minority view. (Details about the events that took place at this time may be found in 2 Kings 24:1–25:20; 2 Chronicles 36:5–21; Jeremiah 39:1–40:6; 52:1–34.) This is an issue that remains very pertinent for Christians in many parts of the

world—and to an increasing extent in the supposedly ‘Christian’ countries of the West.

The location

Shinar (v. 2) is another name for Babylonia. This is where the events in Daniel are set, although the use of the term ‘Shinar’ here may intentionally recall its use elsewhere in the Old Testament. This is especially the case in relation to Genesis 11, which relates the building of the tower of Babel. In Zechariah 5:11, at the conclusion of a vision that would not be out of place in the second half of the book of Daniel, ‘wickedness’ finds its home in Shinar.

The theology

The most significant aspect of these two verses is embedded in verse 2: ‘The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power.’ In Hebrew this is, ‘The Lord gave into his hand King Jehoiakim of Judah.’ The Lord’s *giving* is an important concept in this chapter (it reappears in verses 9 and 17 in Hebrew, although this is not obvious in the NRSV translation of verse 9, which reads, ‘Now God *allowed*...’). But the theological point is crucial and provides the overriding theme of the book of Daniel: although it may seem that foreign empires control the destiny of the Israelites, it is actually the Lord who exercises the ultimate power. The Lord, the God of the Israelites, is sovereign, and even the seeming victory of the Babylonians (and later the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans) happens only because God permits it as part of God’s own greater purposes. We should just note, however, that the covenant name of the God of the Jews (‘Yahweh’, usually rendered by ‘the LORD’ in capital letters in English Bibles) is not used in these verses. In fact, the divine name ‘the LORD’ is only used in chapter 9 of Daniel, and we will discuss it further at that point.

REFLECTION

The overriding message of Daniel is that ultimately God is in control, even though it sometimes doesn’t feel like that. How do we cope when it seems as if wickedness has the upper hand?

Daniel is a fascinating and enigmatic book. Many people have heard of Daniel in the lions' den, and his friends in the fiery furnace, events that took place during the Jewish captivity in Babylon. These and other stories are found in the first half of the book, while the second half describes four very strange apocalyptic visions, suffused with powerful and complex imagery.

The overriding message is that ultimate sovereignty resides with the God of the Jews alone, no matter how powerful any human empires appear. Despite the trauma of exile, God's people are called to remain faithful to him, even if it costs their lives. They are also called to believe that, whatever their present suffering, God will work all things for good in the end.

Dr Doug Ingram is lecturer in Old Testament and Hebrew at St John's College, Nottingham. His main research interest is in how to read the Old Testament in the 21st century, with a particular focus on Ecclesiastes. He has also written Ecclesiastes: a Peculiarly Postmodern Piece (Grove, 2004) and Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes (T&T Clark, 2006).

The People's Bible Commentary is planned to cover the whole Bible, with a daily readings approach that brings together both personal devotion and reflective study. Combining the latest scholarship with straightforward language and a reverent attitude to Scripture, it aims to instruct the head and warm the heart. The authors come from around the world and across the Christian traditions, and offer serious yet accessible commentary. The People's Bible Commentary is an invaluable resource for first-time students of the Bible, for all who read the Bible regularly, for study group leaders, and anyone involved in preaching and teaching Scripture.

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